

May 8, 1968

Dr. Riley D. Housewright
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Fort Detrick
Frederick, Maryland 21701

Reference: SMUPD-TD

Dear Riley:

I am grateful to you for writing your letter of May 3 since it may clear up some misunderstandings between us, and may enlighten me on some matters about which I am not sufficiently informed.

I would have an easier job discussing my column with you if I were able to elicit your own candid reactions on the Skull Valley incident. I will not burden you by asking you to put them down on paper, but hope we do have a chance to talk about it some time personally.

Another major point that I would want to emphasize is that I have nothing to do with the headlines that appear on my columns, and I am very often more aggrieved at them than any of my readers might be. In the present instance I would have preferred a headline that emphasized my main concern about the world problem of multilateral escalation of biological warfare development, rather than the local one of test hazards.

I think you might also be annoyed at my failure to say what I already know about the competence of the laboratory investigations at Fort Detrick. I am sorry now not to have stressed that and, believe me, I had no intention of casting any aspersions on you or on the scientists that I know working at Detrick, or upon your own commitment on working in this area. Please do not confuse me with the picketers who disrupted your recent meeting.

What I am concerned about is the system of secrecy and security that quite prevents and independent evaluation of what is going on. I do not think your remarks to me are a sufficient substitute for it, since I have no way of making an independent judgment, of the kinds that would be available to me in open areas of scientific work, of your diligence, or even authority in supervising the whole program. In any case, I am very much more concerned about the field tests than I am about the more closely controlled laboratory investigations. The only basis for judgment that I have about technical competence for those tests was the Skull Valley incident itself. Really, I was not faulting your competence or concern for safety in my question "Is anyone competent enough to play with these matches?" The fact remains that with all of the precautions that human ingenuity is able to fashion, there have been laboratory infections, and these must be only a prototype of the kind of escape that will surely occur upon any further expansion of field

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testing of biological agents. Your own zeal and good intentions have nothing to do with the matter. My question is whether the system does not drive us down a suicidal path.

I would be rather surprised if you did not share my concerns about these strategic eventualities. Do you believe that we have exhausted every resource in finding ways to build a system of international control? If we have, where will the end of it all be?

Before I sign this letter, I am re-reading yours, and I feel that I do owe you an apology for not having clarified why I referred to the accidents in laboratory research. I could have made my case stronger, and it would have met my intentions more closely, if in writing the article I had spelled out the argument more closely.

With time for reflection I would have written "Even under the most closely controlled conditions of laboratory research directed by professionals of the highest competence, laboratory infections, with fatalities, have occurred from time to time, and are probably fundamentally unavoidable. If this is the case for the controlled environment of the laboratory, how can we be confident of the safety of large scale field trials?"

I do hope to have an opportunity to enlarge on this subject in future columns, and for that reason would be grateful if you could send me voluminous documentation on the analysis of laboratory infections. I don't suppose it is possible, but if you could also document the way in which field trials are conducted with hazardous agents, I would appreciate knowing that too. Finally, please let me know whether I can regard any of your correspondence as being on the record, or available with or without attribution.

Again, I am very sorry if the perceived thrust of my remarks has been so misdirected, since that can hardly help the main argument that I am trying to forward. Perhaps if the recent demonstrations against the symposium had preceded my column I would also have been sufficiently sensitized to draw the line more carefully; meanwhile, I have to admit that with that incident in the background the confusion is likely to occur. I would still, however, go back to the column and its central remark that "these activities are aimed at practicing the large-scale deployment. . .", but of course it is no use trying to tell any reader that he should have understood what was written. That is my responsibility.

Sincerely yours,

Joshua Lederberg
Professor of Genetics